

**When** birds rise into the sky and set off to vault hemispheres, something rises in me. I don't know what it is. I scarcely know how to describe it.

**W**E WERE STAND-  
ing ankle deep in frost-covered grass, stripped down to T-shirts and shorts, shivering like poplar trees. It was the first-period gym class, third down and long yardage (a condition that I have come to regard as a metaphor for my life). Facing off across the line of scrimmage were fellow high school seniors. On the side, prodding us toward responsible, regimented adulthood, was good coach "Teddy Bear."

Coach Teddy Bear, who could make a freshman lose bladder control with a glance.

Coach Teddy Bear, whose list of warm-up calisthenics would have exhausted Arnold Schwarzenegger merely to recite them.

Teddy Bear, who in the collective memory of Whippany Park High School was never heard to utter anything more sentimental than: "Shower up."

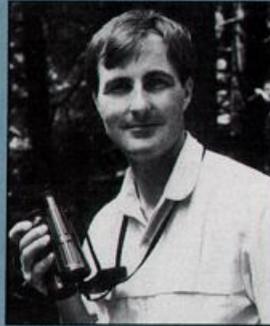
As my classmates took their positions, a sound descended that put the game, and all lives within hearing, on hold. It was the sound of geese, one of the most magical sounds on earth, and it was drawing closer.

First one, then another, linebacker, tight end, and offensive lineman (or, if you prefer, future accountant, car salesman, electrical engineer) stopped what they were doing, straightened, and looked up. In seconds, not a person on the field didn't have his face raised.

It was a large flock, and not very high as migrating flocks go. They were close enough to make out the

Pete Dunne

## AMERICAN BIRDING



## River Dipping

things that we call field marks, the things that distinguish Canada Geese from other geese. But they were distant enough that nothing but our longing could reach them.

One moment passed, two. The sound receded and the great phalanx of birds drew out of sight. Suddenly and simultaneously, a chilling realization struck.

*We'd delayed the game without sanction. We'd courted the wrath of the Teddy Bear, and the price would be pain!*

Some bravely, some timorously, we turned to confront our fate—only to discover that the Coach seemed oblivious to our indiscretion. In fact, he seemed to have forgotten us. He was still watching the geese, and it seemed to those closest that his eyes were wet.

After another moment, the Whippany Park High School's Prince of Pain raised a

paw, wiped it across his Marine recruitment poster face, and turned toward the class. "Wasn't that just too purty?" he asked. It was all we could do to keep from comporting ourselves like freshman.

Today I am 42-years-old, well-traveled, and fortunate enough to have seen many of the mass bird spectacles the planet has to offer. Flamingo-frosted Lake Borgoria, Kenya; corella clouds at Fogg Dam, Australia; Snow Geese rising off Delaware Bay marshes in an avalanche of sound.

But the greatest spectacles of all, the ones that mark my past and lure my future, are the ones that take



MENT divided by the HORIZON.

It was binoculars and a book given by a friend that oriented me towards catbirds and cardinals, making them the focus of my life. But it was a flood of spring migrants that put me in touch with a world of color and song, and made me aware of possibilities undreamed of.

Despite Coach Teddy Bear's efforts, I was oarless and rudderless in the fall of 1975. Then I watched a river of raptors flow by. On that day, my life found mooring on a stony hilltop above Kempton, Pennsylvania.

MASS, add MOVEMENT, and divide it by the HORIZON LINE. Above all the things that I love about birds, I love migration best.

It's not just numbers—because, as I have said, I've seen numbers. They are awe inspiring, but not alluring.

It's not just movement, either. I marvel at the falcon's flight, and the coordinated precision of shorebird flocks. But I am not captivated.

But when birds rise into the sky and set off to vault hemispheres, something rises in me. I do not know what it is. I scarcely know how to describe it. But I am confident my regard is shared and universal.

Why? Two reasons.

First, because there are in the world *birders*, and I submit that without migration, there would be no birders as we know them. There would be ornithologists, who study birds as a scientific endeavor. There would be backyard bird watchers, whose interest in aviformes might be likened to avian landscaping. There just wouldn't be questing, limit-pushing birders.

Why? Because quest needs more than objective; it needs gratification.

If every walk through the woods reaped the same rewards (robin, towhee, chickadee...) and offered no greater prize or promise (CONNECTICUT WARBLER), quest would have quit and enthusiasm succumbed to *ennui* long before anyone's interest was kindled. What drives birders to grab binoculars and vault out the door is the tantalizing possibility of finding something new.

It's strive and succeed; hope and fulfillment; search and discovery; gain and loss. All universally understood principles. And it all hinges on possibility, *chance!*

Migration rolls the dice.

My second reason for believing that migration enjoys near universal allure? Look, if southbound geese can wring rapport out of the impassive likes of Coach Teddy Bear, it can strum a responsive chord in any soul. Including mine.

Including *yours*. Go ahead. Look back. Do an accounting of your own great encounters with birds. Not just the exciting ones. Not just the "Oh boy! There it is!" ones. The great ones. I'll bet you'll find, as I did, that most fit the migration equation: MASS plus MOVE-

Among the things I love most in this world are fallouts in May; waves of Sharp-shinned Hawks pulsing through trees in October; shorebird clouds rising, circling, and setting off toward the Arctic; and the cries of thrushes on moonless nights.

The most desperate escape I ever witnessed involved a southbound Sharp-shinned Hawk. The bird was caught offshore, forced to run a gauntlet of Herring and Great Black-backed gulls from the horizon to the beach—and it won.

My greatest predator/prey encounter also involved a migrating Sharp-shinned Hawk. The bird was flying down the tree line north of the hawk watch platform at Cape May Point when it was blindsided by a Peregrine Falcon who ferried it from the world of the living to the world of the dead, but no further. A Northern Harrier was on the falcon immediately. The wimpy *peregrinus* released the Sharpie right into the harrier's talons.

Perhaps the most startling act of retaliation I ever witnessed involved a migrating bird and a migrating insect, a monarch butterfly. The young Eastern Kingbird made a sortie in the in-

sect's direction, snapped, missed, and returned to its perch. The butterfly doubled back and made repeated stoops on the kingbird's head—forcing the young tyrant flycatcher to duck time and time again.

But without question, the most moving thing I have ever witnessed involved an evening at Cape May Point and a host of migrating passerines. As evening darkened, the birds began rising out of the woods and fields of Cape May Point. First there were hundreds, then thousands—robins, sparrows, Hermit Thrushes, and other late-season migrants. They poured from the trees in such numbers that it seemed the woodlands would deflate. And as they climbed into the void, they called, filling the air with the sounds birds use to encourage each other across the long, dark miles.

It must take great courage to be a bird, or it must take great faith. But whichever it is, I have taken this moment, and others like it, to heart.

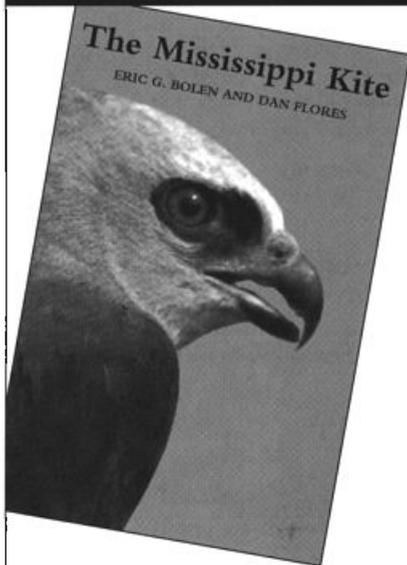
There was a Greek philosopher who once observed that a person can put their foot in a river only once, his point being that a river is constantly changing, never the same one moment to the next. And he was right.

This philosopher had a student who, in the grand spirit of student trying to outdo the teacher, carried his mentor's observation a step further. He, the student, said a person could not put their foot in the river even once, because the very act altered the river. He was right, too, but he missed something.

A person who places himself in the river's flow not only changes the river. They change themselves. As I have changed. As you have changed. As we continue to change. We, who stand by the bank of the vast, eternal river running north and south, anxious to see whatever it sweeps our way. 

—Pete Dunne is the author of *Tales of a Low-Rent Birder*, the soon-to-be-released *More Tales of a Low-Rent Birder*, coauthor of *Hawks in Flight*, and director of natural history information for the New Jersey Audubon Society.

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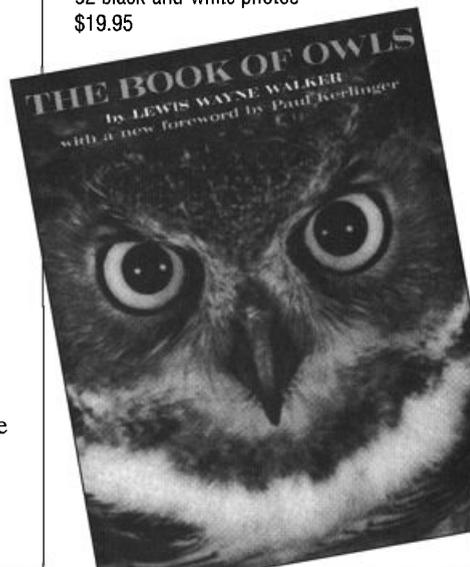
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